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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0843
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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON CEASEFIRE VIOLATION ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH
LINE OF CONTACT

REF: A. BAKU 00147
1B. BAKU 00188

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: According to President Aliyev on March 5, the situation along the Line of Contact has de-escalated and Azerbaijan did not instigate the firefight and would not "take advantage of the situation." Based on our conversations with other GOAJ officials, initial press reports, and public reaction one day after the March 4 attack, it appears the incident was a slight escalation from the clashes that regularly occur along the Line of Contact. The situation appears to have de-escalated, however. End Summary.

12. (C) President Aliyev told EUR/DAS Matt Bryza and the Ambassador on March 5 that the situation on the Line of Contact has returned to the status quo ante. Aliyev alluded to recent GOAJ intelligence that Armenia was preparing various contingencies -- including a provocation along the Line of Contact -- if a difficult outcome emerged from the Armenian Presidential election (ref a). Aliyev said Azerbaijan has no interest in provoking a clash on the Line of Contact because it would serve only to unify Armenia while it is engrossed in a period of domestic political turmoil surrounding the Armenian Presidential election. "It would only help them to consolidate, it does not help us," Aliyev noted. Aliyev said Azerbaijani Minister of Defense Safar Abiyev had contacted him on March 4 around noon while he was traveling outside Baku to report the incident. Aliyev said he instructed Abiyev to stop the shooting. Aliyev said that when Abiyev called at noon, Abiyev reported two Azerbaijani casualties; the President heard later there were 10 Armenians dead and three Azerbaijanis dead, one from sniper fire. Aliyev confirmed that "we will not take advantage of the situation. . . . we will not start . . . but if they start, we will reply."

12. (C) Minister of Defense Safar Abiyev told EUR/DAS Matt Bryza and Ambassador Derse on March 4 that the Armenian side started the engagement around 0200 on March 4, killing two Azerbaijani soldiers and later injuring two Azerbaijani civilian funeral participants. Abiyev said the Azerbaijanis returned fire and were considering responding with artillery. Abiyev said he commanded Azerbaijani units to stop firing after OSCE Ambassador Andrei Kasprzyk and the U.S. side urged restraint, realizing it would be unwise and dangerous to take

advantage of the current tensions in Yerevan. Abiyev said Azerbaijani units did not seize any territory; instead, two Azerbaijani soldiers advanced several tens of meters to ascertain the location of Armenian firing positions and the Azerbaijan soldiers then withdrew. Abiyev confirmed that the status quo ante was in place.

¶ 13. (SBU) The number of troops involved in the clash remains unclear. According to President Aliyev and a public statement from the Azerbaijani MOD, three Azerbaijani soldiers were killed and one wounded as a result of the March 4 clash. (Azerbaijani television has reported that four Azerbaijani soldiers were killed.) The same Azerbaijani MOD statement claims 12 Armenians were killed and 15 were wounded. The Azerbaijani press claims the firefight lasted until approximately 0100 on March 5.

¶ 14. (C) While some conflicting information exists, the episode appears to be a slight step up from the regular level of clashes along the Line of Contact, which usually are confined to snipers killing one or two soldiers or tactical firefights. There are occasional incidents with more than one or two soldiers being killed; for example, two Azerbaijanis and three Armenian soldiers were killed in a September 2007 firefight, according to press reports citing Azerbaijani MOD information. According to local press, 17 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in 2007 in connection with line of contact clashes; 14 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in 2006.

¶ 15. (C) During a breakfast with EUR DAS Matt Bryza and the Ambassador, local commentator Ilgar Mammadov said the Armenian government likely is using this episode to detract domestic and international attention from the post-election

turmoil in Yerevan. Mammadov observed that Russia could also have a hand in the episode as negotiations on the Nabucco pipeline are coming into focus and Moscow wants to create the perception of instability in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus so the EU will doubt Azerbaijan's ability to serve as a reliable gas supplier and transit state. Mammadov argued that at present, Azerbaijan has no incentive to escalate along the Line of Contact because this would directly undercut Azerbaijan's ability to be accepted as a reliable energy exporter to Europe.

¶ 16. (S/NF) As of 1730 Baku time, the Embassy has no additional information on the incident. The DAO is hoping to meet with MOD Chief of International Military Cooperation General-Major Ramiz Najafov soon for additional information. The MNS has reported no new information to GRPO.

¶ 17. (SBU) EUR DAS Bryza did not have an opportunity to clear this message.

DERSE